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ABSTRACT

Schools in Scotland that develop a policy on bullying to which everyone is committed have been successful in reducing the frequency of bullying. Students rarely tell on bullies, not only from fear of their persecutor's revenge, but because they have also learned that adults either show no interest in their problem or give bad advice when they do address the issue. By working closely with teachers, students and others, schools can find out about bullying by observing pupils' social relationships, keeping records of bullying incidents, having children write stories on bullying, and using confidential questionnaires. Although potentially useful, questionnaires many times are too long and difficult to analyze, ask ambiguous questions, or may antagonize individuals through leading questions. Schools may increase the effectiveness of questionnaires by first defining what counts as bullying and then generating a tool that is short, clear, and easily analyzed. Whatever method schools use to explore bullying, there is one step which should always be taken: make sure that the information collected from pupils, parents, or teachers is fed back to them and discussed with them. Schools must show children that talking in an open and honest manner about bullying is a rewarding and relevant thing to do. (RJM)

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SCRE Spotlights

Finding Out About Bullying

Andrew Mellor
The Scottish Council for Research in Education

Andrew Mellor, Anti-Bullying Development Officer for Scotland, argues that pupils have their reasons for not speaking out and that schools should also explore other ways of getting at what is really happening, in order to ensure that 'talking and telling' is rewarding and relevant. Mr Mellor is currently on secondment to the Scottish Council for Research in Education as Anti-Bullying Development Officer for Scotland and has been working with schools, local authorities and parents' groups to help them develop anti-bullying strategies. The Scottish Schools Anti-Bullying Initiative is funded by the Scottish Office Education Department.

"I would tell anybody bar the teachers. They do nothing for you."

Finding out about bullying is not easy, and if attitudes like that expressed by this twelve year old boy were common, then the problem would probably remain hidden.

CHILDREN HAVE THEIR REASONS FOR NOT SPEAKING OUT

It would be easy to dismiss the boy's comment as inaccurate or unfair but that would be a mistake. Many children keep quiet about bullying, partly because they fear what the bullies will do to them if they tell, but also because experience has taught them that adults are often not interested or, when they are, may give bad advice. Of course things are changing but, very recently, I was contacted by the mother of a ten year old boy who was very distressed because of the bullying he was suffering at school. She had done the right things—encouraged the boy to talk and contacted the school—but the advice she had been given by the headteacher was to tell her son to hit back. Not surprisingly, this just made the boy even more upset and did nothing to stop the bullying.

Even those adults who are keen to help sometimes make mistakes. One headteacher said: 'I just cannot stand it. This means that I am apt to dive in before I should.' Children know that bullying is not easy to stop and may well be wary of approaching an adult, however well-meaning, who is known to act before thinking.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Children may also be discouraged from approaching an adult, like this guidance teacher, who gives out an ambiguous message: 'We are not encouraging clyping but the kids are told that they can come and see a guidance teacher at any time... they usually manage to find you.' Schools which have been successful in tackling bullying encourage children to talk. They work to counter the youth sub-culture which outlaws 'grassing' and teachers in such schools try to set a good example. Openness and honesty are encouraged. Words like 'tell-tale' and 'clype' are discouraged.

SOUND ADVICE

The advice about dealing with bullying that adults give to children should be sensible, realistic and appropriate. It has to be based on real experiences rather than untried theories. And, most importantly, adults should not trivialise the problem or be patronising in their attitude towards the child. A serious request for help deserves a considered response.

We must all be wary of only suggesting solutions which are based on our own experiences. Just because we have found things that work for us, this does not necessarily mean that they will work for anyone else. Parents, children and teachers need to be given the option of choosing from a range of strategies. That is why much of my time is spent trying to find out which strategies local authorities and schools, as well as individual teachers, parents and pupils, have found to be successful and which unsuccessful. Just as important has been to attempt to understand why they have worked or not. Some strategies work in some schools but, because of human and organisational factors, not in others.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Some of the things that researchers have found out about bullying include:

- it happens in all schools

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- it has to be acknowledged as a possible problem before it can be tackled
- while high profile campaigns at national, local or school level are useful ways of initiating action, on their own they do little or nothing to help.

It has also been found that schools which have taken action have been successful in reducing the level of bullying and that the single most effective thing that any school can do is to develop a policy to which everybody is committed. One way of getting commitment is to work with pupils, teachers and others to find out about the extent of bullying. This raises awareness and signals the school's intention to do something about it.

WHAT DO SCHOOLS WANT TO KNOW?

Finding out how a school stands in relation to bullying is an important part of such a policy. Questions schools are often interested in include:

- how much bullying is there?
- where and when does it occur?
- what do pupils, parents, teachers and non-teaching staff think should be done about bullying?
- which strategies and resources are used to deal with bullying?
- are there any other strategies, designed to cope with other problems, which could be adapted or extended to help reduce bullying?

These are just some examples of the type of questions that teachers, pupils and parents want to ask. Some schools may well want to ask others, but it is a good idea not to try to find out too much at once. Truth can be obscured by clouds of information.

It is clear that teachers and parents cannot solve the bullying problem on their own. They need the active co-operation of young people—even if only to tell them what is going on. While some pupils do respond to exhortations in assembly and pleas in the classroom, many have decided that keeping quiet is safer than speaking out. In my 1989 survey of bullying in ten Scottish secondary schools (see Spotlight 23), half of the children who had been bullied had told no-one. Of the victims who had told, 47% had told a parent and 31% a teacher.

WAYS OF FINDING OUT

Because of pupils' reluctance to speak out, some schools are starting to explore alternative ways of finding out what is really happening. SCRE's first anti-bullying pack, suggested that teachers and headteachers could:

- observe social relationships between pupils
- keep records of bullying incidents
- investigate pupils' views by asking them to write a story on bullying
- discuss potential problems with colleagues
- ask pupils to write about areas of the school which are safe or unsafe, and what should be done about this
- carry out a questionnaire survey.

The new SCRE pack contains more detailed discussion of the benefits and problems associated with some of these suggestions.

USING QUESTIONNAIRES

As I have travelled around schools across Scotland I have come across many examples of successful ways of investigating bullying but it is the use of confidential questionnaires which has provided a lot of detailed information relatively quickly—and a lot of headaches. One of the things I will be doing over the next few months will be to work with a small number of schools to see if it is possible to devise a questionnaire which is short, clear, easy to analyse and which provides the information which schools need if they are to tackle bullying successfully.

ASKING USEFUL QUESTIONS

The first part of the process of conducting a questionnaire survey is to think carefully about what it is you want to find out. Advice is available about the writing, administration and analysis of questionnaires (see Munn & Drever) and you may want to look at this before you start. When planning your questionnaire you should aim to:

- keep it short
- be rigorous about collecting only the information that you really need rather than that which would be merely 'interesting'
- only include questions which have clear meanings and which can be easily analysed
- use all the expertise that is available—your school may have a mathematics or computer specialist who will help with analysis.

DEFINING WHAT COUNTS AS BULLYING

If you ask questions which mention bullying (eg *Have you ever been bullied at school?*) then it is important to agree what counts as bullying before you start. If you do not do this it will cause much confusion - to the young people answering the question - and to the person who has to analyse the answers. I have used the following definition successfully:

> Bullying happens when one person or a group of people tries to upset another person by saying nasty or hurtful things to him or her again and again. Sometimes bullies hit or kick people or force them to hand over money; sometimes they tease them again and again. The person who is being bullied finds it difficult to stop this happening and is worried that it will happen again. It may not be bullying when two people of roughly the same strength have a fight or disagreement.

There is no harm in using a different definition and it may be best to use one that has been devised within the school but make sure that it is applied consistently.

If you do not want to use a definition at this stage (perhaps because you intend to discuss what counts as bullying at a later stage in the process of developing an anti-bullying policy) there is an alternative strategy that you could adopt: the questionnaire could ask questions about specific types of behaviour.

Examples of such questions are:

- Has anyone at school hit you recently?
- Has anyone at school helped you when you have been upset?
- Have you been very upset recently by names that people have called you?

As well as doing away with the need for a definition, this approach has the advantage that it can focus on positive as well as negative types of behaviour. There is a danger, however, of asking too many questions and thereby making the process of analysis long and difficult.

PROBLEMS WITH QUESTIONNAIRES

Although some schools have used questionnaires successfully, I have come across the following problems:

- questionnaires which are too long and difficult to analyse
- questions which are ambiguous
- leading questions which antagonise parents, teachers or pupils.

One school included a question about bullying by teachers, with the result that the main issue under discussion became the questionnaire and the way it was devised, rather than what had been discovered. Another school used a commercially produced questionnaire which did not seem to have been adequately trialled or evaluated. Although there is nothing wrong with using an existing questionnaire, schools should always consider whether it will provide them with the information *they* need and, if copyright allows, they should adapt it to suit their own purposes.

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Whatever method schools use to find out about bullying, there is one step which should always be taken: make sure that the information collected from pupils, parents or teachers is fed back to them and discussed with them. Although this may seem obvious, it is something which schools sometimes find difficult to do.

Some questionnaires are so complex that it takes months to analyse them and by then the results have lost their immediacy. Others have included ill-considered questions which have produced results which exaggerate the scale of bullying. The temptation in such cases is to file away the results but this is hardly in the spirit of openness which most schools would agree to be desirable. Dealing with bullying provides the opportunity to build better relationships. But this will only happen if adults think carefully about who owns the information that they have been entrusted with, and if the opinions and suggestions of pupils and parents are valued and acknowledged.

SHOWING THAT SPEAKING OUT PAYS OFF

If finding out about bullying is to be any more than a one-off exercise, and if teachers want to ensure that pupils do tell somebody the next time bullying happens, then the pupils who have provided information need to see how it is used. Suggestions they have made about how bullying can be tackled may be accepted or rejected but, in either case, this should only happen after the reasons for acceptance or rejection have been explained and discussed. If teachers really want pupils to talk and tell, then it must be shown that this is a rewarding and relevant thing to do. This means that, where possible, young people's suggestions should be incorporated into school policies.

Questionnaires can be a useful way of gathering a lot of information although they can never provide more than a snapshot of ever-changing opinions and perceptions. They can also help to initiate a discussion about a difficult subject - like bullying - and this is perhaps their main value. The key to reducing levels of bullying is to encourage honesty and openness. The improved communication and relationships which result should mean that bullying is less likely to be the hidden problem that it has been for so long.

Reading

1. *Spotlight 23 - Bullying in Scottish Secondary Schools (1990)* A Mellor, SCRE
2. *Action Against Bullying—A Support Pack for Schools* (1992) P Munn, M Johnstone and L Edwards, SCRE.
3. *Supporting Schools Against Bullying: the second SCRE anti-bullying pack* (1993), SCRE.
4. *Bullying and How to Fight It—A Guide for Families* (1993) A Mellor, SCRE.
5. *Using Questionnaires in Small-Scale Research - A Teachers' Guide* (1990) P Munn and E Drever, SCRE.

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